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LAKE BLUFF — Describing himself as "one of the leaders of the Green Republicans in Congress," U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk called for congressional action Monday on a number of short-term measures to address the record-setting rise in gasoline prices.

"Gas prices are too high, and there are pieces of legislation that can reduce the pressure," said the Highland Park congressman, adding that he was told Monday marked the first time gas hit at least \$2 per gallon everywhere in the U.S.

Monday's press conference was situated on the site of daily traffic jams, the intersection of routes 41 and 176, which has entrance and exit ramps that require traffic to wind through a commercial sector.

Rising crude oil prices peaked at an all-time high of \$58 per gallon last week, triggering a rise of nearly 20 cents per gallon. The U.S. Energy Department has reported that it expects gas prices to average at least \$2.35 per gallon nationwide through Memorial Day.

With some analysts predicting pump prices hitting \$3 per gallon during the summer driving season, Kirk called for the next congressional energy bill to allow expansion of U.S. gas refineries, and to create national standards on gas formulations.

"We need to break the local fuel monopolies (that) put us at the mercy of people who make one type of gasoline," Kirk said. The Chicago market is required to use a reformulated blend called Phase II, and recent supply problems have reportedly contributed to the surge in prices.

Kirk said federal regulation of gas formulas is "overly complicated," and the U.S. should "move to a national system where we're using only one type of clean-burning gasoline."

Asked if a move to different formulas could compromise air quality standards, Kirk said "we need to meet our environmental standards and allow competition."

Kirk also bucked his party in calling for elimination of tax credits for sport-utility vehicles. A 1997 provision of the U.S. tax code allowed small businesses to write off up to \$25,000 the first year after purchasing a vehicle weighing more than 6,000 pounds that is used 50 percent of the time for work purposes.

In 2003, the loophole was expanded to \$100,000, though it was reduced back to \$25,000 last October. With the loophole still covering some 38 different SUVs and trucks, Kirk said it "allows so many gas-guzzlers to be sold."

At the same time, Kirk said Washington should extend tax credits for purchases of hybrid vehicles, which use both electric and internal-combustion engines to produce increased miles per gallon.

According to the Internal Revenue Service, approved hybrids — including the Ford Escape, Honda Civic and Toyota Prius — are eligible for a one-time \$2,000 deduction if put in service in 2004 and '05. But the write-off will be reduced to \$500 in '06 and is then scheduled to be eliminated.

In the longer term, Kirk said he would like the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards for cars and light trucks manufactured in the U.S. to increase 50 percent by 2014. The current average, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, is 27.5 mpg for passenger cars and 21 mpg for trucks less than 8,500 pounds.

Kirk acknowledged that the eyes of consumers — and voters — will be on Washington if gas prices remain well beyond \$2 per gallon or continue to rise.

"I think every leader in America should be concerned that we're moving toward paying \$3 a gallon," Kirk said. "There is a major energy bill due next week, and we have to make sure that energy bill is doing the right thing."

Lake Bluff village officials joined Kirk in announcing their receipt of an \$800,000 grant from the Federal Highway Administration to allow an engineering study on modernizing the mid-20th century design of the routes 41 and 176 bottleneck.

Kent Street, Lake Bluff village administrator, said the study will focus on a tight diamond-shape interchange that will funnel Route 176 traffic directly to and from Route 41.

He added that the proposed improvements would have "minimal impact on surrounding properties," and allow room if and when Route 41 is expanded to six lanes. He also noted that the overall intersection project would cost around \$15 million to \$20 million.

"This (study) makes it something that could happen in the next five to 10 years, as opposed to the 10 to 20 years," Street said. "We've got our homework to do, (and) this allows us to go to the state and say, 'OK, here's the design work.'"

Lake Bluff's new village president-elect, Christine Letchinger, said the modernization of the interchange is "critical to the economy of the entire region."